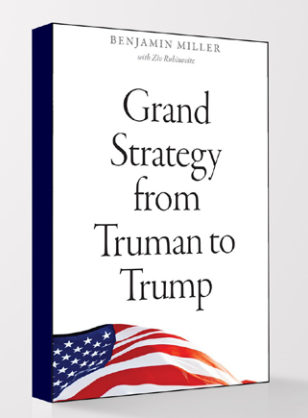

Between Realism and Liberalism

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Grand Strategy from Truman to Trump
by Benjamin Miller, with Ziv Rubinovitz
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In the current global era beginning with the entry of Joe Biden into the White House as 46th President of the United States, understanding the issue of grand strategy design, at least in the context of the American superpower, is vital for understanding international dynamics. These of course include the possibility of slipping into another kind of Cold War between Washington and Moscow, while in the background the Chinese giant casts its shadow on the global environment and poses a significant threat to the two traditional superpowers.

It is in this context that a number of fundamental questions are sharpened, questions that in the distant and recent past have given rise to quite a few internal contradictions and paradoxes regarding a hawkish and belligerent ideology on the part of the United States, based on a belligerent perception of its opponents and anchored in tactics of deterrence, enforcement, and challenge (for example, President Ronald Reagan's initial policy toward the Soviet "evil empire"). During the hawkish Reagan presidency, this ideology evolved gradually and gave way to peaceful and moderate conduct, typical of distinctly defensive liberal governments that rely on the toolbox of traditional diplomacy (anchored in elements of soft power).

In recent decades, American history has also been saturated with inverted paradoxes, in which the White House began by clinging to a mask of idealistic, if not utopian, values, derived from a distinctly liberal worldview (as was the case, for example, early in President Jimmy Carter's era). Four years later, however, the White House was at the opposite pole of thought—that is, within the realistic paradigm (even if without directly challenging its new rival, the Soviet Union). Other cases witnessed realistic conduct based on deterrence and enforcement, including escalating economic sanctions in one area (against Japan and Nazi Germany), and aspirations for cooperation on another level (in the face of the Stalin-era totalitarian Soviet Union, even before Operation Barbarossa). This was on the part of most of the policymakers in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration.

Needless to say, these changes did not emerge in a vacuum but reflected the dynamic nature of the international system, in which key events that took place gave rise to a profound change in the thinking and conduct of American policymakers. Consequently, the initial vision (liberal or realistic) was neglected and subordinated to an ongoing saga of constraints and factors, which seemingly mandated a deviation from the decision makers' original paradigm, "operational code," and beliefs.

Against the background of these internal contradictions and paradoxes, which create a thick screen of fog, ambiguity, and inherent uncertainty about future scenarios among those who follow the processes unfolding in the international arena, the new book by Prof. Benjamin Miller, one of the leading pioneers in international relations in Israel and around the world, is nothing less than a kind of guide that manages to shed new light and clarify complex processes, while at the same time structuring them into paradigmatic categories.

These categories are presented in the first two chapters of the book, which constitute its theoretical framework and include a breakdown of the variables that explain the systemic circumstances in which changes occurred between the various categories. The following chapters (3-10) present a comprehensive historical and integrative application of the conceptual framework developed by Miller in the context of the actual shaping of American strategy from 1945 to the end of President Trump's era, while Chapter 11 includes a concise summary of research findings and key insights, and a look to the future.

The paradigmatic categories conceptualized by Miller create a new, original, and sophisticated frame of reference that can assign the various (and sometimes even contradictory) policies within the outline of a four-dimensional typology that Miller created and developed. This innovative typology focuses on the American superpower and is based on the distribution of power and the balance of global threats it perceives at any given time. These are the fundamental elements from which four grand strategies are derived. Their analysis, in both their paradigmatic and applied contexts, lends meaning and a solid conceptual backbone to the detailed historical discussion of the patterns in which these major strategies were manifested in American foreign policy from 1945 to the Trump era.

The typology thus includes four grand strategies, presented and analyzed in relation to the nature of the systemic variables, which determine the degree of relative dominance of each strategy at any given time period. These grand strategies, which represent the four main dimensions of American foreign policy from the end of World War II through the tenure of the 45th president, constitute a full infrastructure for the classification of all US governments across this typological continuum—while the main independent variable is derived from basic systemic factors (the distribution of global power and the balance of threats facing the United States at some point during the last seven decades).

These four major strategies are: offensive realism; defensive realism; offensive liberalism; and defensive liberalism.

The two liberal strategies are driven not by considerations of balance of power and distribution of force on the global stage but by perceptions of ideology and values, which produce a policy that seeks to change the opponent's regime in order to realize its vision of liberal democracy.

While offensive realism focuses on the effort to obtain military superiority over the adversary and hopes that this superiority will deter and restrain it, thus ensuring systemic stability, defensive realism settles for military balance with the adversary and seeks mutual deterrence, using confidence-building means and arms control agreements. In contrast, the two liberal strategies are driven not by considerations of balance of power and distribution of force on the global stage but by perceptions of ideology and values, which produce—as in offensive liberalism—a policy that seeks to change the opponent's regime in order to realize its vision of liberal democracy; or, as in the defensive liberalism, a more cautious policy than its predecessor's, based on the desire to advance liberal goals (on the political, commercial, and cultural level) through soft power and traditional diplomacy tools.

The book's uniqueness is not only in the original development of four major strategies, each of which spawned a different American foreign and security policy in a particular period of time, but in their dynamic analysis over seventy years, examining the crossroads between the various strategies, anchored in different patterns and structures of the global system over these decades.

The nature of the combination of the basic elements (balance of power and balance of threats) repeatedly creates a systemic

dominance of one of these grand strategies at a given moment, which also makes it possible to predict the crystallization of this strategy when the sufficient prerequisites are met. For example, when the American superpower perceives a high level of threat (and when the threat comes from more than one power), then this level of threat, along with the danger inherent in disrupting the balance of power, will give rise to a major strategy of offensive realism that seeks to achieve superiority in the face of challenge. In contrast, when the perceived level of threat is low (in a multi-power system) it will lead to the adoption of a strategy of defensive realism, which will focus on the effort to prevent the loss of control and degeneration into inadvertent warfare, through confidence-building measures, arms control agreements, and arms reduction. In the context of governments that are liberal by nature, the distinction is between a low level of threat in a system where the United States has hegemony, which repeatedly produces a major strategy of defensive liberalism, and a high level of threat in the same hegemonic systemic circumstances, which produces the strategy of offensive liberalism that seeks to eradicate the threat and export the model of democracy to the source of the threat.

This is the systematic and well-tightened framework, rooted in changing systemic circumstances, presented in this book through the strategic expression in the behavior of US presidents from World War II to the period of Donald Trump in the White House.

The place of the chronological and ideographic literature, which focuses on collecting historical facts without embedding them within an explicit analytical framework, is replaced in Miller's book by a comprehensive structural explanation of its systemic roots and the developments that have taken place in each of the four strategies, sometimes even during the tenure of one administration, in response to changing systemic circumstances (a changing nature of the threat and a changing balance of power).

This gives a picture unparalleled in its clarity of transitions that took place, for example, from an initial defensive liberal perception of the world order to a defensive realistic conception (until the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950), and following the North Korean attack, to a major strategy of offensive realism, reflected in American intervention (under the auspices of the United Nations) in Korea. These transformations of course did not emerge in a vacuum, but reflected the changing perceptions of the United States about the nature and power of the Soviet and Chinese threat. The same is true of other developments and processes, such as the transition of President George W. Bush to an offensive liberalism strategy in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, which with one sweeping strike shattered the era of defensive realism in the run-up to the attack (which dramatically raised the level of threat to American hegemony and led directly to his decision to attack Iraq in 2003).

Although the emphasis in this comprehensive, rich, and thought-provoking analysis is on the level of systemic analysis, Miller does not remain oblivious to the individual at the top of the pyramid, seated in the White House (or "all the surrounding president's men," either).

The analysis in the book of the creation of the major strategies adopted by the US governments from 1945 to the present day is not based on a mechanistic analysis of systemic variables, which define the nature of the specific strategy to be implemented from the outset upon the realization of the appropriate systemic circumstances in a deterministic manner. On the contrary, the analysis includes a cognitive filter through which the international environment emerges in the view of each president (and his immediate environment), which is not necessarily identical to the objective components of the actual "operational environment."

It follows that the process of formulating the strategy also depends on personality and on the unique nature of the cognitive map of the president and his environment, which

includes the way he perceives, processes, and interprets this environment. Naturally, the psychological environment of the person sitting in the White House is not necessarily identical to the components of the objective external environment. Thus, the design of the presidential strategy does not always constitute a quintessential and perfect reflection of developments in the real world, but is a consequence of cognitive processes. Indeed, the apex of the pyramid is often distanced from events whose true nature was clear—or should have been clear—in the first place.

For example, as Miller points out in his analysis of presidential worldviews, the shift in American strategy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, from defensive liberalism to offensive realism, was predicated upon President Carter's assumption that this was not a local action initiated by Kremlin leader Leonid Brezhnev but rather a first step on the path to taking over oil resources in the Persian Gulf, and that the American superpower was facing a major breach of the global status quo. Even before the Soviet invasion began, much reliable information was gathered about the nature of the Soviet threat and its impact on the balance of power, but what was decisive was the White House's subjective interpretation that imbued far-reaching systemic meanings into an event whose actual meaning was solely related to the radical and revolutionary nature of the regime in Afghanistan on the eve of the invasion. The revolutions also threatened to seep into the Soviet republics in Asia, thus challenging the conservative and icy nature of the Kremlin regime.

While the level of the individual (and the small group) and its constant potential for distortions of perception and misinterpretation of developments and crises are discussed extensively by Miller, the book lacks the required emphasis on the state and its many institutions, civil society organizations, the federal bureaucracy, pressure groups and, of course, Capitol Hill, whose popular sentiments have engulfed the White House and may greatly reduce its room for maneuver and freedom of action in the application of its strategic concept.

Separatist public opinion, for example, will always make it difficult for the president to mobilize support for the management of a multi-aggressive, realistic, or liberal strategy. President Roosevelt (FDR) was forced to move forward in pursuing the main goal of his foreign policy, i.e., military intervention in Europe against the Nazi threat to balance the forces rather slowly and incrementally as a result of the dominance of domestic forces, which espoused a separatist "America First" strategy.

Although in the first hundred days of his tenure, President Biden, Trump's successor in the White House, returned the American nation back to an era of seemingly defensive liberalism, it is difficult to predict in which directions his presidency will develop.

This separatist approach, even if under entirely different circumstances, brings us directly to the Trump era, which ostensibly challenges the explanatory infrastructure presented and applied in such an impressive way by Miller. Even according to Miller, one gets the impression that the 45th president of the United States acted outside the traditional parameters of both realism and liberalism strategies. This is because the independent variable that shaped Trump's conduct was ostensibly his perception of himself as a populist leader (of a protest movement), operating "outside the box" and outside the conventional and traditional framework of foreign and security policy management at all levels. Not only did Trump completely ignore the existence of the Russian threat, but his almost absolute focus (except in relation to China, which he defined as a strategic threat) on the internal front does not allow it to be addressed solely by realistic and liberal standards.

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This also illustrates the inherent dilemma involved in the typology developed by Miller, or any similar typology that aims to develop a comprehensive theory of the nature of foreign policy processes. These comprise a wide range of situations that embody a mix of different approaches, schools, and trends, and do not express a single and exclusive strategy that the White House designs (President George H. Bush, for example, who was a realist in his conduct, initiated humanitarian intervention in Somalia in 1992).

Indeed, it is often a complex and multi-participant process, in which the actors involved are not one-dimensional in their approach and preference. In other words, the strategy formulated and implemented in practice includes quite a few cases in which both realists and liberals and both hawks and doves participate in shaping the strategy (even if not to the same extent), and it does not constitute a single entity. Moreover, the same president may adopt opposing patterns of action at any one time.

In this respect it is possible to speak of the dominance of any strategy, but not of an ideal model. This is despite the fact that major strategies are—in many historical cases and as Miller emphasizes—transient, or prone to archiving or dramatic change following the upheavals of times and the President's changing interpretation of their nature and significance.

In conclusion, the international environment at its various levels is complex and fraught with multiple variables, layers, and dimensions, but this is no reason to settle for limited and partial theories, which seek to explain nothing more than a single slice within a dynamic mosaic that is rich in layers and variables. Therefore, Professor Miller is to be recognized and complimented for deciding to tackle what seems like an impossible task—to map the international arena and significantly clarify the complex picture of the superpower's strategic conduct over the past seven decades, in a comprehensive, systematic, original, knowledgeable, and insightful manner.

The fact that even within such a clear picture, which provides a key for deciphering the American "operational code" at the strategic level, there are still black holes and islands of "standard deviations" and paradigmatic ambiguity, is evidence of the dynamic and sometimes enigmatic nature of international existence, and it does not attest to any essential weaknesses in the in-depth, wide-ranging, and groundbreaking study before us.

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